



Entertainment at the Hippodrome

Target audience: 11th grade VA/ US History

Ties to Virginia Standards of Learning: History/Social Science SOL VUS7.e-f

Materials: Access to reference books and the internet

Abstract: Students will research and view video clips of artists who appeared live at the Hippodrome during Maggie Walker's lifetime. Students will create and record a video or podcast highlighting the music and life of their selected artists. Students will work collaboratively to produce a video montage or MP3 playlist of Hippodrome artists to share with other classes.

Richmond's Jackson Ward neighborhood is roughly bounded by 4th, Marshall and Smith Streets and Interstate 64/95 on the northern edge of the downtown district. The neighborhood was originally built by European immigrants, attracted to and made prosperous by Richmond's status as a central retail hub. Freed slaves began moving into the neighborhood during Reconstruction, and by 1920 Jackson Ward was one of the most active and well-known centers of African-American life in the country.

Jackson Ward hosted a thriving entertainment district centered on the famed Hippodrome theatre. Among the names that appeared regularly were Newport News native Ella Fitzgerald, "Duke" Ellington, and Richmond's own Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. The neighborhood was also the home of a number of large and well-known African-American churches. It also hosted a strong retail and business community in which Maggie L. Walker became the first African American woman in America to found and lead a bank in the United States when she opened the St. Luke Penny Savings Bank. Jackson Ward was also the home and headquarters for civil rights advocate John Mitchell, Jr., editor of the *Richmond Planet*, which crusaded against the discrimination and persecution of African-Americans in the South.

The late 1950s would have a devastating effect on the unity of Jackson Ward. City and state officials designed the Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike (now part of Interstate 95) to pass through Jackson Ward, bisecting the neighborhood and tearing down many structures. At the same time, desegregation and white flight were opening other neighborhoods to blacks, beginning a scattering that gradually left more and more of Jackson Ward in the possession of absentee landlords and real estate speculators. As buildings began to deteriorate, the area was further targeted for new development such as federal housing projects, the City Coliseum that opened in 1970, and the building of additional administrative buildings by the city, state, and Virginia Commonwealth University.

The famed Hippodrome, once a thriving nightclub and cultural center in Jackson Ward, opened in 1914 as both vaudeville and movie theatre with a seating capacity of 1,050. Located in the Jackson Ward district, the Hippodrome attracted a mainly African-American audience from the locality. In the 1930's and 1940's it attracted big stars who appeared on the stage, such as Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Billie Holiday, Nat "King" Cole, Ethel Waters, Ella Fitzgerald, Ray Charles, "Moms" Mabley, and James Brown. It was acquired by the Abe Lichtman circuit in 1935 and the Hippodrome Theatre was listed as being a "Negro" theatre for many years.

In 1945 the interior was gutted when the building caught fire and the building was extensively re-built in an Art Deco style with a slightly reduced seating capacity of 850, re-opening in 1946 when it became primarily a movie theatre.

The Hippodrome closed in 1967, re-opened again, then closed in 1970 to become a church. It re-opened briefly in 1982 but since then has remained little used and mainly shuttered. In recent years, efforts to revitalize the historic Jackson Ward district have included plans to refurbish and reopen the Hippodrome as a music venue to showcase both local and national artists.

Websites of interest when researching Hippodrome artists:

<http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/testing/richmond/JacksonWardHD.html>

Ella Fitzgerald

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1j6avX7ebkM&feature=related>

Bill "Bojangles" Robinson

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fIQJzcldzAw>

Ethel Waters

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NoCO_1GcoV0&feature=related

Ray Charles

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q8Tiz6INF7I>

Jackie “Moms” Mabley

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BwxgkGKcdc>

Billie Holiday

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YtqjW2uhBT4>

Nat “King” Cole

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q8tRTZIx298>

James Brown

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgDrJ5Z2rKw&feature=fvw>